

HOW TO BE A VENTRILOQUIST



How to be a Ventriloquist

The art of ventriloquism is thousands of years old. The 'Witch of Endor' mentioned in The Bible (1 Samuel verses 3 to 15) was probably a ventriloquist. She was known as a belly breather, someone who made voices to appear to come from the ground or from their stomach.

Ventriloquism is a skill which can be learned it's not something that you have to be born with. Regular short practice sessions are better than long sessions. Your vocal chords, your tongue and your diaphragm are the instruments that you will be using to become a ventriloquist. By treating them with care and giving them regular short exercise sessions your ventriloquism skills will quickly improve.

To become a ventriloquist you have to be able to speak without moving your lips. Many people think that you also have to keep your lips closed but this is a mistake. If your lips are closed then all that you can do is make a muffled noise. Try it for yourself and you will see that this is the case.

Tools which will help you

A lolly stick and a mirror are great aids when learning to be a ventriloquist. The lolly stick when rested lightly against the lips will vibrate if your lips are moving. If you stand in front of a mirror while you practice you will also be able to see any movement in your lips, jaw muscles or neck.

First step

Stand up so that your lungs and diaphragm can expand.

Your lips should be parted slightly, about the thickness of a pencil is ideal. There should also be a slight gap of about an eighth of an inch between your front upper and lower teeth.

Fill your lungs with air then breath out through your mouth and nose as you say the word '**CHANGE**'. Hold the word and keep breathing out using the pressure from your diaphragm. See how long you can say the word without having to stop to take a breath, (Please don't overdo it though or you will pass out).

Try the same exercise but use the special word '**UNGHA**'. By moving your tongue to different places inside your mouth and also increasing and decreasing the pressure from your diaphragm you will soon learn how to make some of the hard sounds. You will also be able to produce the near and distant voices used in ventriloquism.

Please don't too much at a time as or you will strain your vocal chords and hurt your throat.

Second step

In your normal voice but without moving your lips or jaws pronounce each letter of the alphabet.

You will find that some of the letters **A, C, D, E, G, H, I, J, K, L, N, O, Q, R, S, T, U, X, Y** and **Z** are pretty easy so you can now say twenty letters without moving your lips. You are well on the way to becoming a ventriloquist.

The letter **F** is difficult to say so substitute the following **EHTH**. Each time that you say it, try to make it sound more like an **F**.

The letter **B** is impossible to say without closing your lips but don't despair because we can make a sound which sounds close to **B** by substituting a **V** sound or a **THEY** sound and flicking the tip of your tongue against the back of the upper front teeth. **B** may also be substituted with a **GHEE** sound in some cases. This is not an absolute, whatever sounds best for you is correct.

The letter **M** can be substituted with the sound **ENG** which is made by curling the tongue up to the roof and back of the mouth.

The letter **P** can be substituted with the sound for **F** or **FT** experiment with movement of your tongue as you say these to get the best sound.

The letter **V** can be a problem but a soft **Z** or **ZTH** with your tongue against the top front teeth will make good substitutes.

To say the letter **W** you have to say **DUDDLE YOU**. Unless you are actually going to say the alphabet with your puppet, you will hardly ever have to say **W**. If however you have to say **W** as part of a word as for example in the word wish then the sound **OO** is a good substitute making it **OOISH** or in the word want it becomes **OOANT**.

Practice speaking without moving your lips. If your neck muscles start to ache then stop and have a rest. Don't strain yourself by doing too much at a time.

A good way to learn is to read road signs aloud as you are driving without moving your lips

Types of dolls, dummies or puppets

The cheeky boy or girl doll is the one that many people recognize as being a ventriloquist's dummy. Professionally made ones are very expensive costing several hundred pounds. They are usually operated by a head stick which is used to twist the head and also to tilt it. The various movements such as mouth, eyes, eyebrows and ears are controlled by strings. These are often attached to operating levers attached to the head stick.

Many other types of puppets are now available which can be used for ventriloquists. One very famous lady ventriloquist 'Shari Lewis', made a name for herself on television with a sock puppet called 'Lamb Chop'. Sock puppets are very easy to make up and can be customized by attaching eyes, ears and hair. They are operated by having your hand inside the sock. The toe section is pushed between your thumb and fingers to create a mouth. The mouth is opened and closed by moving your thumb up and down.

Wide mouthed puppets are very popular and come in a wide range from animals and people to mythical beasts and monsters. They are operated by having the hand inserted into the head. The fingers go into the top of the head and the thumb operates the lower jaw. Many of these are very reasonably priced and if looked after will last for many years.

How to operate a wide mouthed puppet

When operating a wide mouthed puppet, it is very important to keep the fingers still and pointing forwards. The mouth should be opened and closed by lowering and raising the thumb. This is an awkward movement to make but it makes the puppet talk properly.

Most beginners make the mistake of raising their fingers to open the puppet's mouth. This gives the 'Bin Lid' or 'Head Flipper' effect. Each time that the puppet's mouth opens it's head flips back and it looks up to the ceiling.

Beginners also tend to hold their fingers up too high which means that the audience cannot see the puppets eyes as it is looking up to the ceiling. This is often called the 'Bird Watcher' pose. Try to point your fingers downwards.

Believe in your puppet or dummy and bring it to life

The more that you can believe that your puppet or dummy is real the better will be your performance. If you believe that the character is real then your audience will pick this up and go along with the illusion.

Try to keep the puppet moving slightly. It should be looking around the audience or doing something even when it is not talking. Do not let the puppet die every time that you speak.

Have the puppet either at eye level with you or at your shoulder level. Look at your puppet when you talk to it and have the puppet look at you when it talks back to you. You can also get it to look at the audience part way through talking to you. This brings the audience into the conversation.

Choose the voice for your character

Another aid to realism is for your character to have a different voice to your own. If the voice is high pitched it could be a young girl or lady. If it is very low it could be an old man or a boy. If you slurr some of your letters then it would make a good voice for a drunk character.

The character can have a louder voice than your own. It can also be slower or faster than your own speed of talking. Examine the way that you talk. Your lower jaw drops to open your mouth and your head remains still. This is the way that it should be with your puppet to look natural.

When the character speaks

Open the mouth of the character for each syllable of the word that it is supposed to be speaking. To accentuate the speaking, for example if the puppet is shouting or making a proclamation, you can also move the puppets head forward slightly as it speak.

Throwing your voice

This is something which many people mistakenly believe ventriloquists can do. It is in fact an illusion created by the skill of the ventriloquist. If you look at your dummy and it's lips move as you speak in a different voice to your own. The audience are led to believe that the voice is coming from the dummy. Likewise if you look at a locked box and speak the following **"Help let me out of this box"** in a high pitched voice, at the back of your throat and without moving your lips. The audience will be led to believe that the

voice is coming from inside the box. Remember this magician's ruse. Where you look, your audience will look.

A simple script for your character

Ventriloquist

Character

- V. Hello Teddy and how are you today?
- C. I dunno (yourname) how are you?
- V. I'm fine, now say hello nicely to everyone.
- C. Ok..... Hello Nicely.
- V. Now stop messing about and say hello to the ladies and gentlemen.
- C. Hellooooooooooooo
- V. I give up you get worse. (scratch your head)
- C. Stop scratching your head.....You'll get a splinter.
- V. Cheeky monkey.
- C. Did you know I used to have a dog with no legs.
- V. A dog with no legs, what did you call him?
- C. I called him St. BRUNO, cos I took him out each night for a drag.
- V. Have you been to school this week?
- C. Yes I have and do you know I'm now the teacher's pet?
- V. The teachers pet?????
- C. Yes she keeps me in a cage at the back of the class.
- V. You know what will happen if you don't do well at school don't you?
- C. Yes I'll become a ventriloquist.
- V. Well Teddy it's time to have some tea.
- C. OK your place or mine.
- V. Goodnight folks.